

Thou, Thy and Thee

Dr Oswald T. Allis (1948)

Born in 1880, Oswald Allis taught at Princeton Theological Seminary; and then, in 1929, along with J. Gresham Machen, Robert Dick Wilson, and others, he founded Westminster Theological Seminary. Allis was among the greatest Presbyterian theologians and Bible scholars of the twentieth century. He died in 1973.

WE believe, that the farther translators depart from the style of the document they are translating, the more complicated does their problem become, the greater will be the variety in the translations proposed, and the greater will be the danger of the translation becoming an interpretation. Doctor Burrows lays down what we believe to be the true governing principle for all accurate translating, when he says “the translator can only follow his text, leaving it for the commentator to explain”. Many of the difficulties in which our revisers have become involved are the direct result of their failure to observe this fundamental rule.

An especially important example of this, because of its doctrinal implications, is their rendering of the second person singular where it occurs in the Greek text.

It is a well-known fact that in contemporary English the forms “thou,” “thy,” “thine”, have almost disappeared from secular use. They are largely restricted to the language of religious devotion, in which they are constantly employed, and which is largely formed by, and owes its peculiarities to, the Authorised Version. Consequently, it is often asserted or assumed that the usage of the Authorised Version represents the speech of 300 [now, 400] years ago, and that now three [four] centuries later it should be changed to accord with contemporary

usage. But this is not at all a correct statement of the problem.

The important fact is this: the usage of the Authorised Version is not the ordinary usage of the earlyseventeenthcentury: it is the Biblical usage based on the style of the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures. The second part of this statement needs no proof and will be challenged by no-one. It is undeniable that where the Hebrew and Greek use the singular of the pronoun, the Authorised Version regularly uses the singular (“thou”, “thy”, and “thee”), and where they use the plural, it uses the plural (“you”, “your”, and “you”). Even in Deuteronomy where, in his addresses, and apparently for rhetorical and pedagogical effect, Moses often changes suddenly and seemingly arbitrarily from singular to plural or from plural to singular, the Authorised Version reproduces the style of the text with fidelity. That is to say, the usage of the Authorised Version is strictly Biblical.

The first part of the above statement is not quite so easy to prove, but there is abundant evidence to support it. According to the late Professor Lounsbury of Yale, the substitution of the plural for the singular in addressing an individual “made its appearance in the English language toward the close of the thirteenth century ... In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the use of the plural steadily increased, and in the sixteenth century it became the standard form of polite conversation ... For some two centuries it may be said that in a general way they (the “thou” “thy” and “thee”) were employed to denote affection or inferiority or contempt.”

If the correctness of Lounsbury’s statement is admitted, it is quite obvious that the Authorised Version did not attempt to make the usage of the

Hebrew and Greek conform to the usage of the Elizabethan or early Jacobean period. It simply followed the Biblical usage, despite the fact that for some three hundred years the trend had been increasingly away from it.

The following words of A.T. Robertson are worthy of careful pondering in this connection: “No-one today speaks the English of the King James Version, or ever did for that matter, for, though like Shakespeare, it is the pure Anglo-Saxon, yet unlike Shakespeare, it reproduces to a remarkable extent the spirit and language of the Bible.” This is its great claim to distinction, the reason it has endeared itself to multitudes of English-speaking people for more than three centuries: it reproduces to a remarkable extent the spirit and language of the Bible.

The real issue seems clearly to be whether or not we are prepared to accept the radical position and give up the use of the singular of the pronoun entirely (“thou”, “thy” and “thee”).

There are two main objections to this. The first

is that it gives up the attempt to retain in English a distinction which is clearly drawn in Hebrew and Greek.

The second is that it means that “thou” and “thee” and “thy” are to pass completely out of twentieth-century English. The singular form of the pronoun is not even to be tolerated in the language of devotion and worship. It is to disappear from the Lord’s Prayer (cf. “Your name be revered! Your kingdom come!”). Scores of our most familiar and best-loved hymns will then have to be discarded or more or less drastically edited; and the liturgies of the liturgical churches (e.g. the Te Deum) will need a thorough overhauling, if such a radical change is to be carried through successfully. If such a change is to be made, this is unquestionably the simplest and easiest way to make it.

We do not believe the change is necessary. Nor do we believe that the vast majority of Christian people desire it or will accept it.